



THE DISCOURSE OF 'OTHER' IN *TO SIR WITH LOVE*

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ABSTRACT

The chance for a change lies in the ability to recognise the reality; and transformation can be brought by proving one's own worth, integrity and dignity inspite of the forces opposed to them. This is the philosophy that Ricky Braithwaite, the protagonist of the novel, *To Sir, With Love* proclaims to the world being a victim of the so called Other world. He not only teaches this lesson but also lives it. Braithwaite encounters racial biases in almost all aspects of his life – in the coffee shops, in the train, in the bus and so on. But the method adopted by him to fight back all this is quite different. Ricky is silent and so maintains his dignity. He tells his students that they cannot take the form of the world around them. He knows that simply getting angry is not the way to change this.

The Blacks had always been the victims of racial discrimination and were treated as the Other in society. We are living in a society where, despite all the light of knowledge and education, people still live in the darkness of racial prejudice and biases. We tend to forget that it is not the skin colour that determines the quality of a person, but his talents and his personality. E.R Braithwaite's book *To Sir, With Love* clearly highlights the issue of racial prejudice through the experiences of the central character, Ricky Braithwaite. The novel throws light upon the deeply embedded racial discrimination in the social structure of Britain. It is a classic work about a dedicated teacher who, using his own philosophy, breaks down the barriers of racial prejudice. Braithwaite's influence on his students can be seen in the climax of the novel.

The author E. R. Braithwaite is attempting to remind us that the Braithwaites of this world alone cannot uproot prejudice, but they can point us to its existence. This paper tries to analyse how effectively the efforts of a single person can start or push the button of change.

KEYWORDS: Other, Racism, Identity, Prejudice

"This is a community with many strong racial tensions and prejudices, most of them longstanding" (166). This single line uttered by Mr. Florian, in *To Sir, With Love* is enough to reveal the seeds of racial discrimination embedded in English social structure. The racial prejudice that Braithwaite encountered in Post-World War England played a major role in his decision to enter teaching. He faced the stark reality of this prejudice on various occasions. He is seen as an alien because of his skin colour.

Ricky Braithwaite is a British Guiana-born engineer who has worked in an oil refinery in Aruba. Coming to Britain on the verge of World War Two, he joins the Royal Air Force as aircrew. Demobbed in 1945, he is unable to find work, despite his qualifications and experience, meeting overt anti-black attitudes. But after discussing his situation with a stranger whose name he never learns, he applies for a teaching position and is assigned to Greenslade School, a secondary school in London's East End.

Although demobilization was relatively unproblematic, the end of the war did not witness a swift return to pre-war 'normality' for the British economy. This very idea is suggested in the comment made by Braithwaite about his insecure status in East London. "I had grown up British in every way. Myself, my parents and my parents' parents, none of us knew or could know any other way of living, of thinking, of being; we knew no other cultural pattern, and I had never heard any of my forebears complain about being British"(36). But now they are somehow considered as 'different'. To many in Britain a Negro is a 'darky' or a 'nigger' or a 'black' and he is identified in their minds with inexhaustible brute strength.

Racial prejudice penetrated all over the white society. This deep rooted prejudice is well presented by Braithwaite in the novel. The blacks are considered as the Other, no doubt inferior to the white ones. This Othering or racism is painfully felt by its victims. The empty seat next to a coloured person in a crowded bus, the slight movement away from a person of colour in an elevator, the over-attention to a black in the shop – all these are clear expressions of racial discrimination.

The 1950's and 1960's saw the peaking of the American Civil Rights Movement and the organizing of widespread protests by the blacks against racial discrimination. Martin Luther King was the person who acted as the leader and his way of working was through non-violent protests. Perhaps Braithwaite is also all against violence and he also seems to follow King's path.

Braithwaite, as he was working for aircrew service, had completely forgotten the fact that he is a Negro. There the colour is not an important factor. But after his demobilisation from the RAF and when he started searching for another job, he came face to face with the absurdities of prejudice to which British society has been wedded to for centuries. His faith in the ideal of the British Way of Life has been betrayed.

Braithwaite had entertained some naively romantic ideas about London's East End with its cosmopolitan population and fascinating history. But he had to endure a totally different experience. There was nothing romantic about the noisy littered street in East London. There was rubble everywhere and dirt and flies. It was a bright sunny day when he entered Greenslade Secondary school but the whole place was depressing like a prison and he felt as if he had ended up in a forbidding-looking place. As he arrived the School he seemed to be culturally shocked.

Most of the pupils in his class are totally unmotivated to learn and largely semi-literate and semi-articulate in the language of their ancestors. "Twenty-six of the class were girls, and many of their faces bore traces of make-up inexpertly or hurriedly re-moved, giving to their youth a slightly tawdry, jaded look... The boys were scruffier, coarser, dirtier... the same wary sullenness" (47). The students were not hesitant to use crude remarks even to their teacher and referred him as 'black bastard' always in a voice loud enough for his ears. During his early days of his career as a teacher Mr. Braithwaite failed to make much of an impression on his class.

In the weekly review made by the students all that was mentioned was a new 'blackie' teacher.

In the School, it is not only from the students that he had to endure racial insults but also from a colleague Weston who is cynical in his remarks. Braithwaite is often reminded of his 'inferior colour' when he is referred to as 'black sheep', 'sun burned friend' and the like by Weston.

Mr. Braithwaite realised that his class passed through three phases with him. The first one being the silent treatment, where his pupils did everything that was asked of them, but without enthusiasm or interest. The second phase was the 'noisy' treatment, where lessons would be interrupted and there was general unruliness. The third phase started with his decision to take firm action to set his class in order.

He throws away the text books and endeavours to reach them as human beings. He treats them not as children but as adults and respects their opinions. They slowly build up a strong relationship with their teacher. The class carried on improving after this and Mr. Braithwaite really enjoyed his teaching. He was very close to his pupils. He believed them to have changed for the better, to have matured. When Braithwaite entered the job of teaching, it was out of his need for a job, rather than for his love of teaching. He did not feel any affection towards the children of Greenslade Secondary school. He clearly states in the beginning, "I wanted this job badly and I was quite prepared to do it to the best of my ability, but it would be a job, not a labour of love" (25). But not only the children but also the teacher undergoes a transformation. This is clearly evident as we reach towards

the end of the novel. Braithwaite starts to feel that they are his children.

Braithwaite also encounters racial biases in almost all aspects of life – in the coffee shops, in the train, in the bus and so on. But the method adopted by him to fight back all this is quite different. Ricky is silent and so maintains his dignity. He tells his students that they cannot take the form of the world around them. He accepts the insults that the world places upon him because of his decision to refuse to follow the world around him. He knows that simply getting angry is not the way to change this. This is clear even from the second chapter of the novel: "I have always been subject to quick explosive anger, but for years I have been making a determined attempt to exercise close control of my temper" (11).

Braithwaite believes that the chance for change lies in the ability to recognise the realities; and transformation can be brought by proving one's own worth, integrity and dignity in spite of the forces opposed to them. This is Braithwaite's philosophy and he not only teaches this lesson but also lives it. Braithwaite suggests that it is one's own actions, and personality revealed through these actions, that defines one's identity. He does not allow anger to blind him. He realises that prejudice can be overcome if he faces it and withstand its initial discomfort. When he faces adverse circumstances due to his skin colour he does not allow himself to be defeated by his anger, instead he asserts his identity to rise above it.

"I've been pushed around, Seales, I said quietly, in a way I cannot explain to you. I have been pushed around until I began to hate people so much that I wanted to hurt them, really hurt them. I know how it feels, believe me, and one thing I learned, Seales, is to try always to be a bit bigger than the people who hurt me" (158).

The incidents happen related to Seales' mother's death is an eye opener to reveal the evils of racism deeply rooted in the society. The class proposed the idea that a collection should be made, in order to purchase a wreath of flowers for Seales. They raised the money for the wreath. But quite to the disappointment of their teacher who believed that he was able to bring in children a complete transformation, they are not ready to attend the funeral. It is not because they don't love their classmate Seales, but because he is a coloured boy and they are afraid what society might think of them if they go to a coloured boy's home. As one of the girls in the class says, "Sir, I don't think you understood just now. We have nothing against Seales. We like him, honest we do, but if one of us girls was seen going to his home, and you can't imagine the things people would say. We'd be accused of all sorts of things" (168).

Braithwaite is disillusioned with the attitude of the society towards the black, but more so with his children's attitude:

"I have given all I could to those children, even part of myself, but it had been of no use... they had trotted out the same hoary excuse so familiar to their fathers and grandfathers... If he'd been pimp or pansy, moron or murderer, it would not have mattered, providing he was white; his outstanding gentleness, courtesy, and intelligence could not offset the greatest sin of all, the sin of being black" (168).

The climax of the incident reveals that even a single man can bring about a great change. His whole class attended the funeral. He is finally able to bring a change in their attitude and it is very much evident that humans are able to change their way of thinking about each other. Yes, breaking the social taboo that one cannot be seen going to a coloured person's home, they attended the funeral. The wave of change has surely started. We can very well hope that these children, the next generation, will shrug off this pervasive prejudice of racism, this Othering.

The idea of the Negro was usually conditioned by the familiar caricature in books and films and the children had been taught with the same textbooks that are prescribed for them which gives the concept that coloured people are, "physically, mentally, socially, and culturally inferior" (96) to the white ones. But Braithwaite develops an influence on his students and gradually they are able to shake themselves free from the biased views of their parents and grandparents. He is very much sure that if the young ones are learning to think for themselves, then surely it is possible to bring about a change in the attitude of society as well.

Though one of the student Potter's remark when he saw the blood trickling from a small wound in Braithwaite's finger that, "your colour is only skin deep sir" (103), evokes laughter in us, it is actually a sharp reminder of the reality about racism. Racial bias has gone too deep into the mind of the children that they are surprised to see that even a dark coloured person's blood is also red in colour. But through the efforts of Braithwaite, they slowly start to see all mankind from a new standpoint of essential dignity. They concluded that basically all people are the same. Braithwaite was applauded for his sincere efforts in educating students for real life by one of his students Moira Joseph when she says for the whole class that they think they are much better children for having had him as a teacher.

Braithwaite stands firmly on his philosophy even when faced with insults. During his visit to a hotel with his girlfriend Gillian, the waiter's discourtesy towards him is very much evident. Gillian reacts suddenly and went out angrily and she even blames Braithwaite for not reacting to the situation. She asks him how he can take such insults so calmly. He replies, "At first it was terrible, but gradually

I'm learning what it means to live with dignity inside my black skin" (145).

The novel also echoes the ill-effects of racism when it extends to inter-racial marriages. It is this fear of loss of identity that is explicit in the words of Gillian's father, "It is not just the two of you Rick that have to be considered. You might have children: what happens to them? They'll belong nowhere, and nobody will want them" (174). But Braithwaite replies that the children would be not anyone's business but their own and they belong to them.

Braithwaite makes it very clear in the novel that it is not necessary to do anything special for a Negro, but simply to behave to them with courtesy and gentleness which every human being should give to and expect from every other. The author is attempting to remind us that the Ricky Braithwaites of this world alone cannot uproot prejudice; but they can point us to its existence. They can at least start or push the button of change. Other is not something that is not easy to erase. But considering the Other as inferior or weak is the thing to be avoided. Everyone is unique in their own way. Accepting people with their difference is what is needed. The novel seeks to draw attention to the unjust effects of skin colour bias and gives the message that it is your attitude, behaviour and talents that define you and not your skin colour. If a single man can bring about a change in a group of people, definitely we can change the faults in the society even if it is deep rooted evil like racism.

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